

Development of a Marine Protected Areas Strategy for Washington State

Mary Lou Mills

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

History

Both world-wide literature and local data point to the value of marine protected areas for a variety of marine resources and habitats (Palsson and Pacunski, 1995; British Columbia/Washington (BC/WA) Marine Science Panel (MSP), 1994; Rowley, 1994; Shackell and Willison 1995; West 1997). These areas can also be used to provide more holistic management of the resources in a given area (Agardy, 1998). The local research has provided more than just academic arguments in favor of establishing these areas. Within Puget Sound, the work by Palsson and Pacunski has been pivotal in development of policy on marine protected areas. It has also been a fundamental feature in outreach and education about such areas. The demonstration of the changes in the fish populations and fecundity is persuasive information that tends to win over the most ardent skeptics in public meetings.

Development of a strategy to design and implement a network of marine protected areas has been a multiagency effort in Puget Sound. This is in sharp contrast to the way many of the existing protected areas were developed. Many different agencies have the authority to protect sites, either through regulatory or proprietary means. In addition, the existing areas were developed piecemeal by individual agencies acting, with little consultation with others (Marine Protected Area Work Group, 1998).

Puget Sound-Georgia Basin (PSGB) Task Force

In 1994, the PSGB Task Force was established by the Environmental Cooperation Council in 1994 to respond to the recommendations of the Marine Sciences Panel report (British Columbia/Washington (BC/WA) Marine Science Panel (MSP), 1994). One of the recommendations was to establish marine protected areas to help reverse the declining trend in a variety of fish and wildlife resources in the area. The Task Force prioritized the recommendations of the Marine Sciences Panel and established work groups with branches in Washington and British Columbia to deal with the top four items. The Washington Marine Protected Area Work Group was started in 1995. Since British Columbia had already been working on establishment of marine protected areas, the interagency group in place there served as the B.C. branch of the Work Group.

In Washington, the Work Group's initial planning called for design of a system of marine protected areas and included a series of outreach meetings. Understanding of the concepts and support by current users of the sites was considered crucial to the success of the network. This consideration was based on observations of the existing sites, such as Edmonds, which were working well (Palsson, 1997). This consideration also seemed to parallel the course taken by the British Columbia group.

This approach was criticized by some of the Marine Science Panel members and by others who recommended that protected areas be established as expeditiously as possible. The Task Force asked the Work Group to add efforts to develop and establish some marine protected areas quickly. The Washington Work Group then drafted a list of potential sites based on interviews with a few recognized experts. As evaluation began, the Work Group recognized that it did not have the expertise to evaluate the sites technically. In addition, the political reality was that such a list could generate great opposition if existing users in the area did not feel they were involved with development or that the agencies were moving forward with less than adequate evaluation.

This was reported to the Task Force in early 1997 and the Task Force clarified the role of all the Work Groups. Since only the agencies with management authority can implement the

recommendations, the Work Group products should be more detailed reports on the actions needed to effect the changes. The actual implementation, appropriately, would come via normal agency functions. In short, the Work Groups needed to plan rather than implement.

Draft Strategy

With that information in hand, the Marine Protected Area Work Group produced a draft strategy in January of 1998. The strategy calls for an interagency effort to design and implement a network of marine protected areas. The management structure recommended to accomplish this is modeled after the Puget Sound Ambient Monitoring Program. The key elements are: 1) a draft policy for marine protected areas in Washington; 2) evaluation of sites by a policy and a technical committee; 3) strong involvement by the public, tribal cooperative managers and local governments; 4) use of the precautionary approach; 5) evaluation of the outcomes at individual sites; and 6) adaptive management. The draft strategy was circulated for public comment and is currently under revision. Comments to date have recommended that the process be re-drafted with less emphasis on the evaluation and more discussion of the public involvement sections. This re-drafting is now underway.

What Happens Next

When revisions are complete and acceptable to the Work Group, the strategy and recommendations will be forwarded to the Puget Sound-Georgia Basin International Task Force. The Task Force will have the option of forwarding the documents on to the Environmental Cooperation Council (ECC) or to other Work Groups established by the Task Force. The ECC, in turn, may make recommendations to the state and the province including the agencies with jurisdiction which must effect changes needed to bring reversal in the declining trends in these resources. Any actions recommended here and pursued by these management agencies will be subject to full agency review including the public participation and comment process of the organization involved.

Other Marine Protected Area Activities Underway

While this strategy was in development, several other events were taking place. Two Washington State agencies have policies in development regarding marine protected areas (the Department of Natural Resources and the Department of Fish and Wildlife). The development of the interagency strategy, in part, prompted examination of the issue within the agencies. The draft Fish and Wildlife policy was to be presented to the Fish and Wildlife Commission in a workshop on March 21, 1998. The Commission was scheduled to consider adoption of the draft policy in June 1998 (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1998c).

The concept of marine protected areas for specific species was included in two policies adopted by the Fish and Wildlife Commission in the last year. The Forage Fish Policy and the Wild Salmonid Policy both contain provisions for creation of marine protected areas for species including forage fish in marine waters (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1998b and 1997b). Marine protected areas are an integral part of the Puget Sound Groundfish Management Plan under development by the Department of Fish and Wildlife. This also was to be brought to the Commission for a workshop in March and for adoption in June, 1998 (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1998e).

In addition, Fish and Wildlife staff discussions with environmental groups and recreational scuba-diving organizations lead to 13 areas being proposed for closure in the recreational regulation package. The package of proposed regulations stated that these areas had been suggested by divers for two reasons. They were concerned about declines they felt had occurred in various fish populations at these sites. In addition, they were interested in unharvested areas for observation diving. The package of draft regulations also said the agency was interested in adopting several of the proposed sites as pilot areas. (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1997).

These proposals were circulated to the public and to the treaty tribes for comment. Two new sites were selected for closure, based in part on the comments received and in part on agency staff analysis. Octopus Hole (Hood Canal) and Orchard Rocks (Rich Passage near Bainbridge Island) were closed for harvest of all species. In addition, the Edmonds Underwater Park was enlarged to match the area under lease by the City of Edmonds, and two beaches in Des Moines were also closed to match local park rules. These mark the first time the agency has closed all harvest in such a marine reserve. To effect the closures, new language was added to the agency's rules denoting these areas as "conservation areas" (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1998). Regulations for complementary closures in these areas to commercial harvest were to be considered by the Commission in June 1998 (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1998d).

In addition, areas previously closed by the Department of Fish and Wildlife were reviewed by the tribes in preparation for the next revisions of the shellfish management plans. These areas were not agreed to in the initial plans although the tribes, for the most part, have avoided harvesting in them (Cahalan, 1998). This arrangement will be discussed for possible inclusion in the redrafted plans.

Conclusions

Development of a coordinated strategy for a network of marine protected areas has been underway among Washington State agencies. Research results have played a critical role in justifying such a network and in convincing the public of the potential effectiveness.

While the strategy being developed is still in draft form, it has had various "spin-offs" including development and adoption of various policies in management agencies and adoption of several small "conservation areas" (no-take sites) under Department of Fish and Wildlife recreational regulations.

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